

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH REAR ADMIRAL TERRY MCKNIGHT,
UNITED STATES NAVY, EXPEDITIONARY STRIKE GROUP 2, COMMANDER, TASK FORCE 151, VIA
TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: COUNTERPIRACY OPERATIONS TIME: 8:00 A.M. EST DATE:
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ADM. MCKNIGHT: Hey, good morning back there, or afternoon here. How's
everybody doing today?

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good. Doing well.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: We going to talk about the Super Bowl or pirates?
(Laughter.)

Q Yarr, pirates.

MR. HOLT: Yep, it's a pirate morning. With us on the line this
morning is Rear Admiral Terry McKnight, who's the commander of Task Force 151.
And Admiral, thanks for being with us on the Bloggers Roundtable this morning.
ADM. MCKNIGHT: Good to be here.

MR. HOLT: So do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Sure. First of all, I'll talk a little bit about Task
Force 151. I heard somebody make the comment -- no, we haven't named it Task
Force Decatur, but that's a good suggestion. So I'll put that in my pocket here
to talk to -- (audio break).

Just a little background about Task Force 151: As most of you know,
the piracy has been a major issue not only in the press but in the maritime
community for probably a good -- better part of a year. Where did it -- how did
it start and where did it all come from?

Of course, you know the background and the history of Somalia.
Basically, it's a failed state. A lot of their livelihood was they were
fishermen for very many years and countries were coming in and fishing in their
international waters -- (inaudible) -- stealing their fish -- and stealing their
fish. And so they -- what they did is they started pirating some of these
fishing vessels and they figured out that, hey, we can go for bigger fish. And
so they went for bigger vessels.

So over the last few years, we've seen a pretty good increase of the
pirating off the coast of Somalia.

Most of the pirating happens in the Gulf of Aden, which is south of Yemen of course, north of -- (audio break). They pirate the vessels, and then they basically head south off the eastern coast of Somalia. And that's where the camps are located, where they keep these ships that are pirated basically in a nest, so they can keep better control of them.

Some things that have changed that have helped us in this case to combat the piracy: First of all, the United Nations has come out with several resolutions -- the most current ones are 1846 and 1851 -- that gives us more authority to combat piracy. The other thing that has changed dramatically in the area is the maritime community. We have tried very hard to say to the maritime community, you know, there's just not enough Navy ships out here to cover 1.1 million square miles, so we're trying to put you in like a, what we call the -- what we call it is the UKMTO Corridor. Basically, visualize it as an interstate system where you transit east and west. So we say, "If you can transit in this corridor, we will offer you as much protection as we possibly can." So that seems to be working.

Right now, we have about 14 nations out here with about 20 ships, so there's a lot of activity out here with military aircraft and ships. And my biggest concern, of course, is deconfliction and coordination. And we've had an excellent response from the ships that have been out here working on that.

I have talked directly to the commodore of the EU task force; I have exchanged e-mails with the Chinese, and have talked to -- (audio break) -- the ships that are out here. So it appears that it's been working pretty fairly in the last couple of months.

The other thing that has been a success for us, and always good, is the weather. When the -- these skiffs that the pirates have are not much bigger than a Boston whaler, so when the weather picks up, they tend to stay at home, and not out here.

But I think the combination of the coalition working together and the maritime community has decreased the pirate activity dramatically over the last couple of months.

So I'm very positive at what has happened.

Concerning my coalition right now, like we said, it's Task Force 151. I have three ships in it right now, the USS San Antonio, which is my flagship, which I'm currently (stationed ?) on, the USS Mahan, which is a DDG, and then also I have the HMS Portland from the U.K.

We've had some encouraging signs from other ships and other nations to join the task force. I expect that by the spring we will have quite a few ships joining me.

That's all I have for now; I'm ready for your opening questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. And Eagle 1, you were first online. Why don't you get us started, sir?

Q Good morning, Admiral. Can you hear me?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: I can hear you loud and clear.

Q Okay. Okay, I've got a couple of questions. One is, I know you got 14 nations and 20 ships. How -- is this going to be a passing fancy? If the pirates -- (audio break) -- their horns for a while, are we going to see the nations disappear and then just -- (audio break) -- pirates return, in a Groundhog Day scenario?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: That's a good question, and I'll try to answer that. First of all, the European Union has a schedule for ships and aircraft through to December 2009. So they are out here permanent basis. Like I said earlier, Task Force 151, we're small right now, but we've had some encouraging signs from other nations that want to join: (Australia ?), Japan, Turkey, just to name a few that have expressed an interest in there. So that -- we are pretty sure that we'll probably get some cooperation from that.

So I think you'll see an ebb and flow, but I don't think that you'll see a complete dissolvment of the units out here, because as long as the Somalis pirate these vessels and get money, it's going to be a problem. And the goal of all of us out here is free commerce. And no matter what our navies do, we have to make sure that we have free commerce throughout the open seas and throughout the world.

Q Thank you, sir. MR. HOLT: All right. Andrew?

Q Admiral, this is Andrew Lubin from The Military Observer. Sir, recently the Navy suggested that commercial ships hire their own security guards, that the Navy either couldn't or wouldn't protect them. But you're on the San Antonio. The San Antonio comes with a couple LSDs. Instead of trying to turn around and patrol 1.1 million square miles, why not set off the -- set up off the Somali coast? (Audio break) -- be a lot shorter period to defend. And you -- they don't come out of the coast. Isn't that an option?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: We've looked at that. There are -- there's a couple tactics that we've looked at. But as I said, and as you mentioned, the water is so vast out here that we have -- and the thing to think about is detecting a small skip. And I'm -- and most of you've probably seen the size of a Boston Whaler, and that's what they are. So they're very hard to detect by radar.

So what we have seen is that, for us to get after the pirates, a ship will be in distress and call that they think they're being pirated.

What I say is the golden 30 minutes, if we can get an aircraft or a ship overtop of that pirated merchant ship within 30 minutes, we've had a lot of success to warding off the pirates. So that's what we're trying to do.

We try to keep them up here, like I said -- it's like herding cattle. If we keep them all in one location, it's a lot easier for us to protect them in the corridor, rather than if we're -- because if we're down off the coast of Somalia and these small craft just slip by us, you know, whether it be at night or during the day, then it's going to be pretty hard for us to intercept them.

Q And they use small skiffs to sail in that many -- miles out into the ocean?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Unbelievable, yes. We see them out here all the time. And they're not only the pirate craft, but they're fishermen. I mean, these

things are not much bigger than, I would say, you know, seven, eight nine, at the most 11 meters, you know. So they're out here.

And the one problem that we found out is, the first corridor that we set up put us right through a lot of the Yemeni fishing zones, so starting on the 1st of February, we're going to bring it down a little bit to get it out of the zone, so hope we can -- you know, deconfliction between the pirates and the fishermen.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Chuck.

Q Good afternoon, Admiral. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Can you give me the geographical -- rough geographical area of your operation? Are you solely off the coast of Somalia, or are you going up towards Djibouti, down toward Kenya? What are your basic limits?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: We're working in the Gulf of Aden, which is, of course, south of Yemen, north of Djibouti -- excuse me, north of Somalia and east of Djibouti. So it's just -- if you would look at a chart and just visualize that sector right up there, that's where we're operating mostly now. We're not going down off the coast of Somalia, off the east coast of Somalia. I'm concentrating all my efforts up here in the Gulf of Aden. Q Okay. Two more very quick questions. Are any of the pirates coming out of Yemen? And also, we keep hearing about mother ships for these small vessels. Are there, in fact, mother ships, or is that a media invention?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: No, there are mother ships. In fact, that's what -- what we tend to see happens is a mother ship will either drag along couple skiffs with it and have probably 10 or 15, 20 pirates on board, and then they'll send the skiffs out to, you know, go after a merchant vessel. So, yes, there are mother ships. And that allows them to stay out for an extended period of time so they don't have to go back to Somalia.

The pirates that we have seen are -- and I think I've got it right -- 99.99 percent are from Somalia. They have -- and we've seen times that they hang out -- (audio break) -- territorial waters. And it's unfortunate the coast guard for Yemen just does not have the capability to patrol their waters. But we have them that they'll come up there and hide out in the waters and then come south.

Q All right.

Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. David. David Axe. You with us?

Q Right. Just un-muting.

MR. HOLT: Oh.

Q Hi. This is David Axe with War Is Boring. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us. Can you hear me all right?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Sir, I can hear you loud and clear.

Q Great. So we've been hearing that the CTF-151 is going to have more aggressive rules of engagement than -- well, than CTF-150 did. Can you talk about that some?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Right now we're looking at the -- what we call a phase two operation -- (audio break) -- after the pirates and take them, you know, basically like a -- round them up like a police force would, and basically take them to a country. And it was announced on the 16th of January that Kenya has agreed to take the pirates if we capture them.

Now the lawyers are at work for the particulars, and as soon as we (can?) get those mechanisms in place, then we will shift our operation to go -- to possibly go after some of the pirates and take them to Kenya. And they will be of course prosecuted in the Kenyan courts.

Q Well, exactly how does that differ from CTF-150's approach?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: CTF-150 was not in the counter-piracy business. They were basically in the trafficking of illicit -- illegal drugs and weapons of mass destruction. So basically when 150 had a pirate event, it was more -- much -- pretty much a merchant ship would ask them for assistance, and they'd provide assistance. And that's why we stood up 151, because we're going to deal exclusively with counter- piracy. One-fifty will go back to doing basically their, you know, intercepting of illegal drugs and searching vessels for weapons of mass destruction.

Q One little follow-up. You'd mentioned Kenya being willing to accept captured pirates under their legal system. Is Kenya providing any other assistance? ADM. MCKNIGHT: Not that I know of. But I think that's pretty significant to have a country that will take them, because we cannot -- basically, if we're not going to move to that next phase, if we don't have anybody that'll take them, because it would be extremely hard to take them back to the United States.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Maggie?

Q Good morning, Admiral. My -- I -- first, can I sneak in a question from Steeljaw Scribe? He e-mailed it to me. He says, regarding CTF-151, what do you see as the greatest challenge to the successful execution of your mission?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Well, I think the couple challenges -- like I mentioned earlier, when -- people who are under my task force, I can direct them, you know, how to put helicopters in the air, how to manage the ships. The problems that I foresee -- if you're in a -- you know, it's just like running, you know, a highway system. If there's 14 nations and 20-plus ships, and most of them have helicopters and maritime patrol aircraft, the biggest concern is coordination and deconfliction, because what we don't want to happen is have a accident where two friendly helicopters run into each other.

But I've had great communications with all the coalition partners out here, and it's been -- you know, it's been interesting exchanging e-mail with the Chinese.

They've been very forthcoming and willing to talk about -- (audio break).

I met a couple weeks ago with the EU commodore. We had lunch and we talked about some of our concerns and how he's going to operate and will operate. So that's the biggest concern I have, we have out here right now.

Q Okay, so how are you handling these competing national interests?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: I don't think it's really the national interest. It's really a world interest, you know, to ensure commerce flows freely throughout the open seas. So I think it's a collective effort, to make sure that we all are working together in piracy, piracy -- you know, basically we try to deter piracy. And it's an international problem.

So everybody's concerned with it. But I think that it's not -- we're not really looking at national interest. Of course, some of them have national-flagged vessels that they want to make sure that they get through here.

So some of the nations like, you know, have decided they'll escort them -- (audio break). We're not doing that. We're just kind of in a -- we put ourselves in a box and try to let ships pass through there and provide protection in that box.

Q Very good, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Bruce.

Q Hi, Admiral. Bruce McQuain with QandO and BLACKFIVE.

I think Admiral Gortney talked about this a little while ago. And he was mentioning that the pirates are, you know, unsurprisingly a bit lazy -- they go for ships with a low freeboard that are moving slow -- and that anything running at about 15 knots, with a high freeboard, they avoid, which brings me to the question.

The question is, have you passed along anything, to the shipping coming to the area, as to how they can prevent boarding by pirates? ADM. MCKNIGHT: We sure have.

The European Union set up a website. And it's called MSC(HOA). And basically what the merchants will do is, they will register in MSC(HOA) and tell us that they're coming through here. So now we identify a merchant vessel.

We tell -- if we have what we call a vessel of interest but, like you said, low freeboard, slow-moving, then we will probably tell them, okay -- (audio break) -- lookout for them to try to provide them with extra protection, because like you said, if they're moving slow, 8-9- 10-11-12 knots, low freeboard, that's just like the beacon there, you know, pirate me; pirate me; pirate me.

So we try to, you know, get them near some other ships, some other military ships and/or aircraft, so we can provide them protection while they transit through the zone. (Audio break) -- information out there. And the merchants are listening too.

They also -- things like, I mean, just a simple thing like providing a lookout. If they see it coming and then do some maneuvers and then get on -- (audio break) -- we've had pretty good success warding off -- (audio break).

MR. HOLT: All right.

And Raymond.

Q Good morning, Admiral, or I guess evening in your area. This is Raymond Pritchett from Information Dissemination and United States Naval Institute blog.

I have a question about your situation. Are you rotating with the strike groups as they come in and out, or are you currently assigned with the Iwo Jiwa? I'm just trying to figure out, are you going to be consistently on that, as part of 151 for a while, as we begin this process?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: I will be here as -- I will be here for a while. Are you still there? Can you hear me?

Q Yes.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: We're just -- we're just getting a little static, so I've picked up the -- the handset. I will be out here probably for -- (audio break) -- three or four months. What we're looking at is, as it is a coalition-led task force -- (audio break) -- looking for another coalition navy to possibly lead it for a while. But for right now, I'll be out here for -- my guess, at least until April.

Q Well, that actually answers my second question. So this will run a command routine similar to 150, where you rotate with coalition partners for total command?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: That's correct. Right. And I -- my chain of command first -- (audio break) -- is Commodore Lowe who is a -- (audio break) -- navy officer and is deputy, you know, Combined Maritime Forces commander. So I'm actually going to work through him, and then he works for Admiral Gortney.

Q Admiral, are you able to talk about how many helicopters, how many small boat teams, things of that nature, that you guys have?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Like I said, well, I'm on the USS -- (audio break) -- LPD 17. Right now, I have three helicopters onboard. I have two LCACs that also are -- it was part of the original loadout we can use. And of course, we've got the 11-meter -- (audio break) -- teams, the visiting, boarding, and search and seizure teams -- (audio break) -- Coast Guard law enforcement that is working with me -- (audio break) -- a Marine detachment that's helping us out, and I've got the fleet -- (audio break) -- very robust staff. And I would say my task force is very fortunate to have the San Antonio, which is a great platform, that everybody can sit on here, and all the other elements that I have with me.

Q And a final question, Admiral. Can you tell me your mission objective? I mean, Somalia is such a complex place. We all know Somalia -- or piracy can only be solved on land. What is it that 151 is -- what is our objective with 151? Is it simply to allow the free flow of commerce, I mean,

very generically, a sea mission? Can you kind of summarize this, as far as a mission statement, where we know we can point to something and say that's tangible success, this is working?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Well, first of all, I mean, like I said earlier, you know, there's the -- (audio break) -- of our navies to make sure we have free flow of commerce -- (audio break). For that, I mean, that -- we have to be out here to secure that.

To deter -- and the other thing is to basically deter piracy. I have had several conversations with people -- (audio break) -- working in the maritime community and also about this, that they know -- (audio break) -- know that we're out here.

They know that we're out here and that means we're going to deter piracy.

Since December 1st we have seen very little pirate activity out here. And the European Union's been out here. We've been out here. So I would say, if I had to -- (audio break) -- it's to deter piracy and allow the free flow of commerce throughout the Gulf of Aden region.

Q So there's nothing as far as Somalia itself is concerned. This is just specific to guarding -- essentially guarding the access to the seas.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: That's correct. I have nothing -- (audio break) -- go after, you know, land targets or anything like that. That's, you know, a lot -- I mean, people would say -- and you're right that to solve it, you've got to fix it in Somalia. But -- (audio break) -- you know, it's a failed state. People are -- there's actually mention of, you know, at least let them establish, you know, a coast guard- type -- you know, that they could just patrol their own coast. But -- (audio break) -- is basically -- (audio break) -- runs right now vice a(n) organized government.

Q Thank you very much.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right. Having a little audio problems, there. But, okay, had a couple other folks that had joined us late. Who else is -- who else is here?

Q Noah Shachtman.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Noah?

Q Hey, how you doing? Admiral, maybe you mentioned this at the top, but can you tell me exactly how many interdictions U.S. ships have done, you know, since December 1st and exactly how many -- you said you haven't seen much pirate activity. Can you tell me exactly how much you've seen?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: We've done a -- we've done a few. I mean, we have -- in events, we have not -- I mean, we've been out here and -- (audio break) -- what we call "assisted" some boardings, looked at some -- (audio break). We are still in the phase to deter. We are not going on any vessels that have been pirated already. And we're basically still new in the area, getting started and working on our tactics to see how better -- how best we can deter the pirates.

Q I'm sorry, but so -- maybe I used the wrong word. You talked about, you know, sort of ships giving out some sort of distress call to you and you sending a helicopter or a boat over and warding off the pirates. How many of those incidents have there been?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Since I've been out here, since we stood up 151, we have not done any of that. But some of the other coalition nations, in working with us, have done that. So we've had a joint -- let's say a coalition -- (audio break) -- we may provide them some information that we hear on the radio, and we'll send whoever's close to it. (Audio break) -- ships right now have not -- (audio break) -- pirated event.

Q Got it. And also, according to a U.N. study, they talked about the corridor not really reducing attacks but only concentrating attacks from a sort of mean distance of 30-1/2 kilometers to 24.6, but that the number hasn't really changed much.

And I was wondering if you could speak to that.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: I disagree. I think that if it's -- if we're going to try to deter it, we've got to -- if we put them in a corridor, then we have better control and we know where they are. If they -- (I don't ?) know if you heard me talk about the MSC(HOA) website, but if we can -- (audio break) -- that our targets -- that they're slow movers, both -- (audio break). If they spread out (throughout ?) the Gulf of Aden, then it's going to be extremely hard for us to provide protection and support.

Q Okay. So it may be that, in fact, the numbers haven't gone down, but you're saying this may be the only way to manage the situation.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: I think we -- I think we just have to wait for some time. Like I said, since the first -- (audio break) -- there has not been a successful pirated event. There's been several attempts, but there -- so we've gone almost two months without a successful ship being pirated. So whether that's the weather or our forces out here, it's -- we would have to wait and see. But I think we've had an effect, because, like I said -- like, I've talked to people in the intelligence -- (audio break) -- that the pirates know we're out here, so they're going to try their best to avoid us.

Q Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anybody else on line?

Q This is Eagle 1. I -- Admiral, I would note, to just help clarify matters, apparently a German LPG ship was taken today in the Gulf of Aden by pirates.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: I'd have to -- I'd have to get some information on that. So I haven't received that intelligence yet.

Q Okay.

STAFF: Yeah, this is Lieutenant Fage (ph). I'll make sure, at the end of this call, that you guys all have my e-mail address so you can send any questions like that to -- (audio break).

Q Yeah, just -- it was just a comment. And I have a question about the Kenyan matter. I don't know how much detail you can go into or if this is purely a lawyer question. There's a lot of -- I've been getting a lot of e-mails containing law-review articles and cites about the rights that should be afforded to the pirates. Have -- what kind of rules are -- of -- for captured pirates, what kind of rules are our sailors operating under, if you can let me know?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: It's strictly the -- I'll probably get the wrong terms, but it's the -- strictly what human -- you know, they -- we retrieved these -- (audio break) -- (accordance ?) with all rules and regulations. We would -- you know, we'd -- of course we'd, you know, ask them questions. We'd treat them well. Law enforcement -- it's a law-enforcement mission, so we would treat them just like any other law-enforcement thing.

And let me just clarify one thing here. I don't think we'll ever stop pirates. We will do our best to bring the numbers down. When you think of the number of ships that pass through here a year, between 23(,000) and 25,000 vessels -- and the chances of getting pirated here are pretty slim.

But we think that we've had a pretty good success rate in the last couple months.

Q Jack, I got a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Admiral, Andrew Lubin again. Sir, a follow-up on Eagle 1's question. You've got an awful lot of fire power with 26 MEU. Why can't you take a (more robust ?) role in this? Are you working under some really restrictive ROEs?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Basically, because we're in the maritime environment. And just think about a law enforcement event. I mean, you just don't go into a bar scene and just start, you know, rounding up the usual suspects and start taking them off to jail. I mean, you just have to make sure we have the right evidence, whether -- you know, we have pretty good knowledge of, you know, what they're using, whether they're carrying, you know, guns or RPGs or something like that. So we have to make sure it's a criminal case. And if we're going to take them to Kenya, we have to make sure we have the right evidence so that they could be prosecuted.

Q Well, wait --

ADM. MCKNIGHT: And we want -- the best thing we want to do is we want to catch them in the act, because then we've got real good evidence.

Q Yeah. I mean, a bunch of guys in turbans and a skiff with an RPG, what more evidence would you need?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Exactly. And that's what we want to catch them, doing that. As soon as we shift -- as soon as we get all the procedures in place with Kenya so we can take them, then we'll start going after them. Like Admiral Gortney said, we're going to make it -- we're going to make it unpleasant to be in the pirate business.

Q Having an RPG is not an offensive act? You're not allow to deal with it at sea?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: If they would -- of course, the rules of engagement, like anything, if they were -- if we were going after them and they pointed, you know, an RPG -- (audio break) -- appropriate measures. Q Okay. Great.

MR. HOLT: All right. And we're about out of time here. Admiral, thank you very much for joining us. Do you have any closing thoughts for us?

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Just, like I said, it's a collective effort out here. The coalition is working together. All these nations are working together. I've been very impressed with that. I mean, you know, sometimes when we get into operations, you know, some people say -- (audio break) -- don't want to do that. But we've had total cooperation. We have the cooperation of the U.N. So I think it's going to be -- (audio break) -- when we look back over it in the next couple of months.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us. And I'm hoping we can speak again here in a few months and see how things are going. Appreciate you being with us for the Bloggers Roundtable today.

Rear Admiral Terry McKnight, who is the commander of Task Force 151. Thank you, sir.

Q Admiral, thanks for the time.

ADM. MCKNIGHT: Thank you. (Audio break) -- talking to you again.

END.